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Scottish Natural Heritage.

Assynt Walking Network

Explore some of the walks
around Assynt
Trobad is gabh cuairt ann an
Sgìre Asainnte

Photos by Andy Summers, Ken Crossan and
Iain Sannan as supplied through the
Sutherland Partnership



Second Edition

The Assynt Path Network

Situated in the far north-west corner of Scotland, Assynt boasts some of the most dramatic scenery in Scotland. From the rugged mountain pyramids of Suilven and Canisp, to the silver sands and turquoise waters at Achmelvich and Clachtoll beach, Assynt has much to offer walkers in the area. There are also lots of things to see. From golden eagles to minke whales and ancient brochs to clearance villages, Assynt is steeped in history and rich in wildlife and can still boast a vibrant crofting culture. This booklet highlights ten of the most popular paths where one can experience Assynt first hand.



walkers at Leitir Easaidh



bell heather

Cuairtean Asainnte

Ann an fad iar-thuath na h-Alba, lorgar sgìre le seallaidhean cho breagha is cho iongantach 's a lorgar ann an sgìre sam bith air feadh na h-Alba: is i, sgìre Asainnte. Eadar na bioran-stùc Sula Bheinn is Canasp, na tràighean mhaiseach, tlachdmhor aig Achadh Mhealbhaich is Clach Toll is iad deanamh briseadh air tonnan an Cuan Siar, a bharrachd air fiadh-bheatha an àite is croitearachd slàn, chan eil teagamh ann gun urrainn dha luchd-tadhail an leòr de sheallaidhean is de chuimhneachan a thoirt dhachaigh leotha. Leis na h-iolairan-mhonaidh is na mucan-mhara, na dùin is na seann bhailtean anns an deach eucoir uabhasach a dhèanamh air muinntir an àite tro linn nam Fuadach; tha an sgìre seo air a bogadh le eachdraidh is beartas de fhiadh-bheatha is le daoine fhathast a' cumail ri fìor dhoigh beatha na croitearachd. Gheibhear anns an leabhar seo, deich dhe na cuairtean far am faigh thu fìor bhlasad air Asainnte.

There may not be many paths in this landscape but the community has always supported responsible access for those who want to explore the great outdoors. However we would always encourage walkers to respect that Assynt, however seemingly wild and remote, is a working landscape and walkers should always follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Some of the routes pass through extensively grazed areas, where dogs should be kept under strict control particularly before and during the lambing season and through the breeding season for birds - most of which are ground nesting in this area.

These paths are some of the main routes within Assynt that have been identified as part of the Core Paths in Sutherland by The Highland Council consultation exercise 2007.



golden plover

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Please take particular care in the more remote parts of the path network - if in doubt go prepared for a hill walk rather than a country stroll, and keep in mind that mobile phone coverage is limited.

Enjoy the Assynt Path Network and respect its life and work.....

- ❖ Leave gates as you find them
- ❖ Keep dogs under close control
- ❖ Keep to promoted routes through fields
- ❖ Use gates and stiles to cross fences and walls
- ❖ Respect the privacy of buildings, farm and croft steadings
- ❖ Respect farm livestock, crops and machinery
- ❖ Take your litter home with you
- ❖ Protect wildlife and plants
- ❖ Guard against risk of fire
- ❖ Make no unnecessary noise



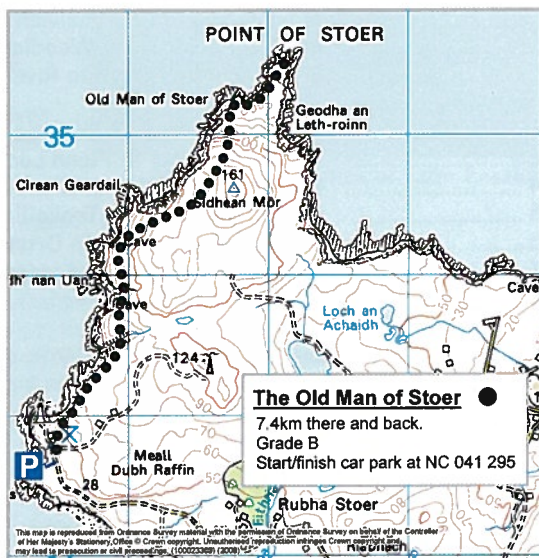
Crofts at Clashmore

1. The Old Man of Stoer (7.4km there and back)

The route

An excellent walk along a wild headland with magnificent views of the Western Isles and mainland mountains of Sutherland. The name Stoer comes from the Norse word "Staurr" meaning "a pole" which describes the 70m high sea stack which stands off shore, just south west of the Point.

A small car park below the lighthouse is located at the start of the path. A signpost shows the direction to take but there are several routes along the cliff top. The terrain is mainly short grass and sometimes wet and slippery in places. Care must be taken near the edge of the cliff. 1km from the start the path crosses a shallow gully. The sides are badly eroded and can be awkward. After another kilometre you can look across a rocky inlet and see the impressive sea stack. From here the land rises along the lower slopes of Sidhean Mor - the big fairy hill - and then drops down to the flat boggy ground overlooking the sea stack.



Continue north-west towards the Point of Stoer. Return by the same way or climb the easy slope to the cairn on the top of Sidhean Mor. From there head towards the radio mast which stands on the low hill-top to the south - a faint track can be followed most of the way. From the radio mast a vehicle track winds back to the start.



Old man of Stoer

Beware sheep are regularly chased over the edge of the cliff by unruly dogs and therefore dogs are not welcome unless on a lead.

What you can see:

Minke whales, killer whales, Atlantic white-sided, common and white-beaked dolphins, porpoises, grey seals, otters. Meanwhile shags, fulmars, kittiwakes and black guillemots nest along the cliff face and the sea is often teeming with guillemots, razorbills and puffins from the nearby seabird colony at Handa Island.

2. Achmelvich to Altanabradhan (3.2km there and back)

The route

The path starts at the Highland Council beach car park below the Youth Hostel. Stop briefly at the Ranger hut to get some more information on some of the wildlife you may see on the way. Go through the croft gate and follow the track north. After 400m a signpost will indicate a well defined path leading off to the left. The path will take you past the Cathair Dubh chalets, but if you continue the path will eventually dip downwards towards a small burn that was the site for the old meal mill. If you follow the burn you will discover the beautiful little sandy beach at Port Altan na Bradhan.

Very Gneiss

Achmelvich rests on a very ancient landscape. The Lewisian Gneiss (pronounced "nice") is one of the oldest rocks in Europe and is thought to be three billion years old. It is a metamorphic rock which means it has been squashed, buckled and transformed by massive pressure and huge temperatures deep under the earth's surface. It is an exceptionally hard rock, which doesn't disintegrate very easily and therefore doesn't easily produce soil.

The Meal Mill at Altanabradhan

Seemingly in the middle of no-where lies this ruin of a meal mill (muileann) with several of the old mill wheels and the millrace still to be seen. In fact it was built around 1760 on the boundary of Clachtoll and Achmelvich townships and shared by the tenants who paid thirlage to the Estate for the privilege. It was operated by John Macleod, up to the end of the nineteenth century. In fact the footings of the miller's house are still visible at the tip of the hill. Also known, as a "clack mill" from the noise made by the clacking of the stones as they turned, horizontal water mills are common in Scandinavia, the Northern and Western isles. The water supply for the mill was Loch na Creige Leithe, the Loch of the Grey Crag, where a dam and sluice were built to control the flow. Water would have been forced down a chute to turn wooden paddles. The grinding stones were set horizontally above the paddles.



Altanabradhan mill

Plants and wildlife you may see

The calcium rich grassland behind Achmelvich beach is called machair. In the summer the meadow can be pure yellow with birds-foot trefoil and lady's bedstraw. Other times of the year you can see autumn gentian, fairy flax, spring squill and wild carrot. Ringed plovers often build their nest on the ground at the edge of the machair. Around the coast the rocky coastline the soil is more acidic. Amongst the heather you may see the splendid pink fragrant orchids, delicate frog and butterfly orchids and the rare pyramidal bugle. On the cliff faces the little roseroot clings to life against all the odds. The red and black, day flying, six-spot burnet moths are easy to see on sunny days.

In the summer a small group of harbour porpoises maybe seen along this rugged coastline and if you are very patient you may see dolphins or even whales. Keep an eye out for the red-throated and black-throated divers, a real West Highland specialty.



Achmelvich beach

3. Lochinver to Achmelvich (5.0km one way)

The route

Starting from Baddidarach on the north shore of Lochinver, this enchanting path will take you through to the wonderful sandy beach at Achmelvich. Starting from Lochinver village you head over the small road bridge towards Baddidarach. Follow the main road beyond the Highland Stoneware and after the cattle grid take the right hand road up the hill. At the next fork take the road to the left and you will see the signpost marking the start of the path going through some scrub woodland next to a private house. The wood is soon cleared and after the steep ascent you will see some splendid views of Lochinver bay. Follow the path for 3.5km to the croft houses at Ardroe. Pass in front of these, descending to the shores of Loch Dubh. The path eventually joins a tarred road which connects to the Achmelvich single track road. Turn left for another 0.5km to Achmelvich and the beach.

There is a small shop at one of the camp sites at Achmelvich. Return by the same route.

What to look out for:

Ravens and buzzards can be seen hunting over the landscape here and if you are lucky you may get a glimpse of the peregrine which nests nearby. Go quietly as you approach the sheltered sea inlet at Loch Roe. It is a great place to see otters and you will surely see the common seals hauled out on the islands waiting to grab the sea trout and occasional salmon as they gather around the mouth of the river.



Peregrine with prey



common seal pup

4. Culag Community Woodland (4.4km network of paths)

Culag wood forms a dramatic backdrop for the picturesque village of Lochinver. A variety of trails wind their way through the 36 hectare mixed woodland and down to the shore. Leased by the community of Lochinver since 1992 the woodlands have become the venue for many exciting projects such as the sculpture trail, the heron viewing project, the teepee and children play area.

Footpaths

Various trails will either take you to the viewpoint, passed the bog, full of colourful dragonflies or down to the beautiful white shore, which makes an excellent picnic spot. These are all short and easy paths but for the more adventurous you will have to wind through dense trees and balance across logs over burns to complete the "Are you brave enough" path. A leaflet, including a map, showing all these routes can be obtained in the Tourist Information Centre on the main street.

There are two main car parks both on the Inverkirkaig road south out of Lochinver. The main car park is 400m on the right along this road. Woodside car park is slightly further on, beyond the Primary School, just as there is a steep turn in the road as it goes up the hill at the end of Loch Culag. There is an orientation map and leaflets in each car park.

Woodland sculptures

As you wander through the woods watch out for some strange creations hidden in the trees. You might want to follow the "all the time in the world" sculpture trail or perhaps you might just come across the big nest, large enough to hold small children. In the middle of the wood you will discover an exciting play area for younger kids, including wooden igloo and seesaw. And if it is raining the teepee makes a perfect place for a picnic. There is also the orient"tree"ing trail for the aspiring naturalist.

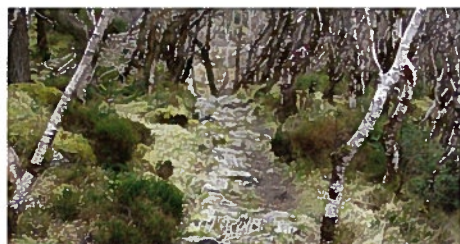
Wildlife

The Wood is a great place to see wildlife. A mixture of native trees and more recent planted conifers create a mosaic of habitats interspersed with rocky crags and boggy swamps sloping down to the rugged coast. Walk quietly through the woods and you might see an otter or pine marten. You will certainly hear some of the herons which nest high in the tree tops.

Over one hundred species of flowering plants can be found in the woods along with a rich and luxuriant growth of mosses and lichens in the moist and clean sea air. In the autumn the Culag woods are one of the best places to see lots of different fungi.



woodland floor



Culag viewpoint path

5. Glencanisp Lodge to River Inver (6.5km)

An excellent circular walk from Lochinver means you can leave that car behind. Start up the minor road to Glencanisp Lodge. After 2.5km you will come to the Lodge. After the gate bear left up the hill, through the forestry, to the top of Druim Suardalain. The views from here of Suilven are stunning. The path then drops down again through a metal kissing gate and eventually to the River Inver. Turn left at the river and follow the riverside path 2.5km back to Lochinver. If you do this route in reverse it is easy to miss the turn leading away from the river. The best way is to turn right 100m after the woodland on your right finishes.

The Clearance village of Dubh Clais

Beyond the kissing gate the land opens up and becomes quite flat. Although it is hard to believe it today, amongst the bracken you may see the old ruins of several houses. This now deserted landscape was once the township of Dubh Clais (the Black Valley). It was cleared of all the people in 1800 to make way for a sheep farm. Six households (six men, seven women, 23 children, and seven servants) were evicted to make room for sheep. All of them were MacLeods. The flat area of coarse grassland in front of the ruins was once the "corn fields" where they grew bere barley and black oats. The sturdy Highland cows were kept for making milk and cheese. And in places you can see the old rigs where they once grew potatoes. Today Buzzards patrol the grassland for rabbits and field voles and badgers dig snuffle holes in the grass looking for earthworms and leatherjackets.

Glencanisp Lodge

Built in 1850 house for John Scobie, the tenant of the new sheep farm, it was later extended to become a shooting lodge. As from June 2005 it is now owned by the community and run by Assynt Foundation as part of Glencanisp & Drumrunie Estate extending to some 44,400 acres. The estate includes the mountains of Canisp and Suilven and offers some of the most challenging deer stalking in the Highlands. With comfortable sleeping accommodation for twenty people, this fourteen bedroom hunting lodge is nestled in some breath-taking scenery

Wildlife along the river

The River Inver is a famous salmon river and you will see all the fishing points along the way. Occasionally you will see an osprey trying his hand as well. But also look out for otter sprainting posts along the bank. These are the little deposits, left by the otter, to advertise his or her presence to other otters in the area. The mixed woodland along the river is a great place for great-spotted woodpeckers, woodcock, siskins, treecreepers and the usual woodland birds. You may also be lucky and get a glimpse of the sparrowhawk which nests in the vicinity.

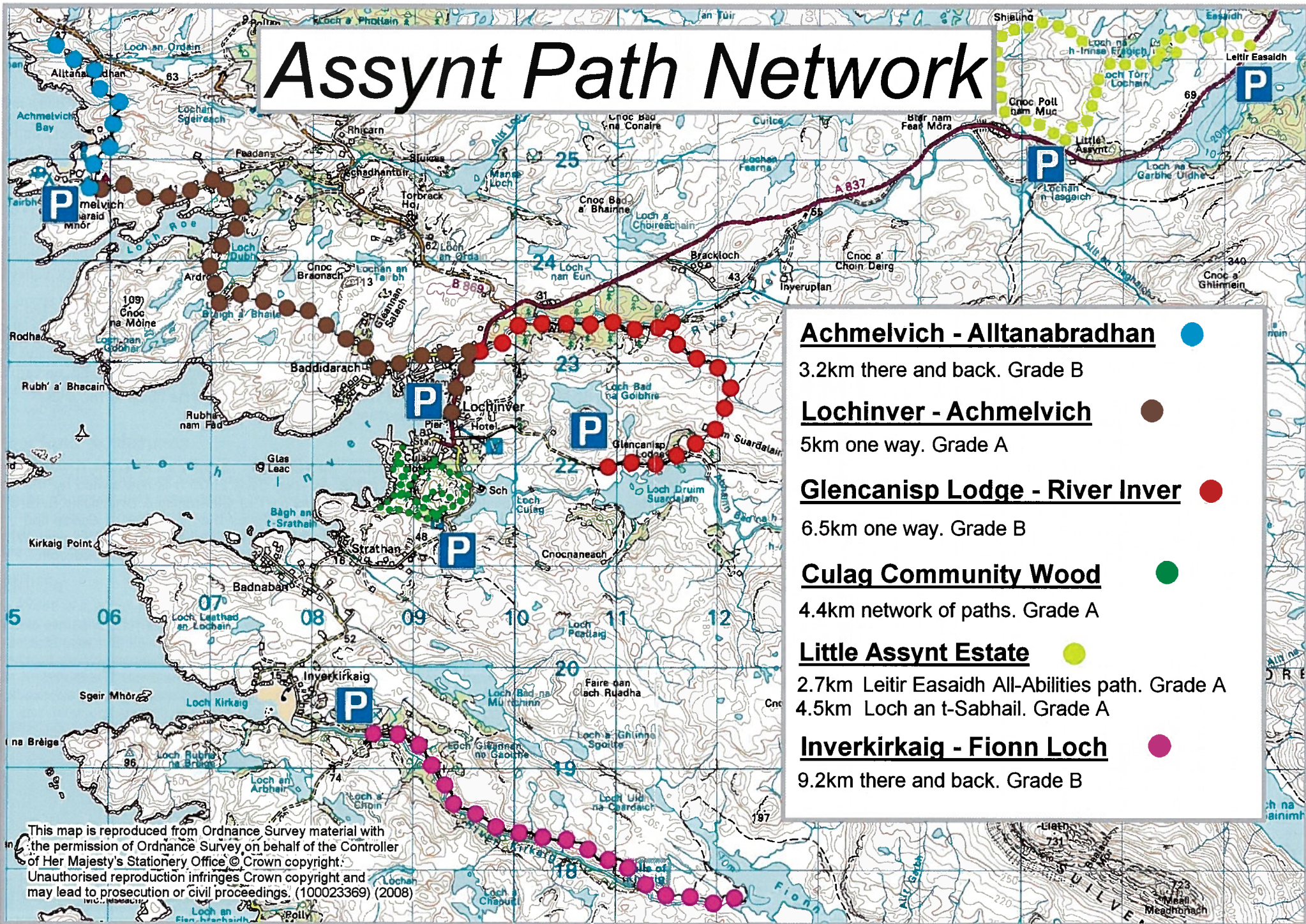


Black-throated diver



Suilven at dawn

Assynt Path Network



- Achmelvich - Alltanabradhan** ● (blue)
3.2km there and back. Grade B
- Lochinver - Achmelvich** ● (brown)
5km one way. Grade A
- Glencanisp Lodge - River Inver** ● (red)
6.5km one way. Grade B
- Culag Community Wood** ● (green)
4.4km network of paths. Grade A
- Little Assynt Estate** ● (yellow-green)
2.7km Leitir Easaidh All-Abilities path. Grade A
4.5km Loch an t-Sabhail. Grade A
- Inverkirkaig - Fionn Loch** ● (pink)
9.2km there and back. Grade B

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6. Little Assynt Estate

Leitir Easaidh All-Abilities Path (2.7km there and back)
(additional option: path linking to the Loch an t-Sabhail path)

A Path for all abilities

A super quality, newly built path suitable for everyone including prams and wheelchairs was completed in 2005. It enables visitors of all ability to enjoy the Assynt landscape as it winds its way past two beautiful lochs to reach a viewpoint of the surrounding Assynt landscape with super picnic opportunities along the way. The award winning path has two jetties, compost toilets, shelters from the rain and a specially adapted boat for disabled anglers.

And if you want to make your walk longer you can now leave the Leitir Easaidh path at the view point and carry on westwards and this will link you with the Loch an t-Sabhail path. It will take you back to the main road at the Little Assynt Field car park where you can retrace your route back to start.

There is a good car park at the start of the Leitir Easaidh walk. It is on the A837 Lochinver to Ullapool road, 10km from Lochinver at the western end of Loch Assynt.

Little Assynt has been a community owned estate since November 2000. The estate is over 2,900 acres and most of it is planted with native trees. As you walk round listen for the haunting call of the black-throated divers and keep scanning the magnificent skyline of Quinag for soaring golden eagles. Although we hope you will not see any deer within the tree planting area, otters are known to frequent the loch and the many ditches in Little Assynt are still a stronghold for the water vole.

The Loch an t-Sabhail path (4.5km round trip)

This circular path was completed in 2010 and starts at the Assynt field car park which is on the A837, 8km out of Lochinver. This path has a good surface all the way round. It was built by local trainees from Culag Enterprises. There are several viewpoints with spectacular views in all directions and a picnic table and shelter half way round.

The path will take you past the deserted township of Loch Beannach near to Loch an t-Sabhail (loch of the barn). The ruined township dates around 1774 and includes several structures which are the remains of the small tenants' houses. The low footings or foundations are all that is left of their stone and turf walls. The ruins of a small horizontal mill lie on the side of the burn running out of Loch an t-Sabhail which was dammed to provide a good supply of water.

There is a path linking both Leitir Easaidh path and the Loch an t-Sabhail path.



walkers on the new path

7. Inverkirkaig to Fionn Loch (9.2km there and back)

This popular walk, within the Assynt Estate, gives superb views of River Kirkaig and the 20m (60 feet) waterfall, as well as the mountain Suilven. In fact it is used as an approach to Suilven by climbers. The path continues after the Falls and the beautiful Fionn Loch all the way to Elphin (another 14km).

The route

The path starts at the car park at the bridge below Achins bookshop. Cross the road and head through the kissing gate. After 200m take the narrow path through the trees that branches off to the right. You will pass through a gate. After following the river edge for 2 km the path starts to climb above the gorge and eventually out of the trees into the heather clad moorland. The path gives great views of the mountains of Coigach to the west and as you round the corner, the magnificent rounded dome of Suilven comes into view. After 1.5 km, look out for the junction, which will take you down to the Falls. The path here is badly eroded but the final descent to the viewing places is on rocky steps. Be careful!

Continue for another 1 km and you will reach the shores of Fionn Loch. The path may get very muddy and wet nearer the loch. The route to Suilven lies this way but is a longer and more serious exercise requiring proper equipment and expertise.

What you can see on the way:

This walk incorporates many of the wildlife-rich habitats of Assynt in one short walk. The walk starts under the canopy of the multi-stemmed hazel trees, graceful birch, rowan, aspen and holly trees. Look for redpolls, willow warblers and tree pipits. In spring the woodland floor is a delightful carpet of primroses, wood sorrel, wood anemone and dog violets. The river here is a mixture of slow, silent pools and fast flowing, swirling water, with every boulder a staging post for dippers and grey wagtails.

As you leave the riverside into the open hillside, listen for the cuckoo, a sound that strikes fear into the many meadow pipits nesting in the heather. Look out for the male stonechat doing sentry duty on the whin bushes. Green tiger beetles scurry across the path in May, while later in the year you are as likely to see a slow worm or an adder warming up in the early sun. And don't forget to look up and search the horizon for the many buzzards, ravens and maybe even a glimpse of golden eagle or tiny merlin.



Red Deer

The Kirkaig Falls are formed where an old volcanic intrusion crosses the ancient bedrock to form a hard barrier to the flow of the river. It is the end of the line for the ascending salmon. Try as they might they cannot jump it. Further on up the path is Fionn Loch, (white loch) one of Assynt's finest brown trout waters and where you may see red-throated divers flying in with food for their young. On the sides of the loch greenshank, common sandpiper, dunlin and golden plover raise their broods in safety.



Greenshank



Kirkaig Falls

8. Bone caves (4.1km there and back)

This walk visits the famous limestone caves that lie under the northern crags of Beinn an Fhuarain. They are named after the remains of a bewildering amount and variety of animal bones that were discovered here over a hundred years ago. There are three main cave entrances, named badger, reindeer and bone cave as you travel from west to east.

Although they do not go in very far it is worth taking a torch with you to get maximum value from your visit.

The route

The walk starts at the car park 4km south of Inchnadamph. Go through the gate and follow the path that passes a lovely waterfall and then winds slowly along the river course. Look out for various springs along the way. One minute the river is flowing fully and the next the river bed is dry.

After about 1.5km the path forks. You will be coming back along the left hand path. However just now take the right hand path across the dry river bed and up the steep slope to Creag nan Uamh (crag of the caves). Take care exploring the caves as the ground around the entrance slopes steeply. To return carry on eastward beyond the caves and the path will curve round and take you gradually back to the original fork.

Bones Bones, Bones

The bones of bear, reindeer, lynx, arctic fox and wolves that once roamed this part of the country have all been discovered. More recently the skull of a polar bear has been identified. These are important discoveries because they allow us to glimpse back in time to see what animals live here during the past 45,000 years. For example over 1000 fragments of reindeer bones have been dated as 47,000, 25,000 and 8,300 year old. That means that reindeer lived here after the last ice age and in the preceding two interglacial periods. It is the most complete record anywhere in Scotland of animals who lived in the last glacial period (middle and late Devensian). Bones of four humans have also been discovered. Radio-carbon dating puts them at around 4,500 years old.

However there are still lots of mysteries surrounding the bones in the caves, which will only be answered by extensive survey work. In the meantime the lynx and polar skulls are now on permanent display at the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Note the site is a special site of scientific interest so please do not dig into the floor.

Left high and dry

The Bone caves were created thousands of years before the last ice age, as water gradually dissolved the limestone along cracks and fissures. They are only part of a larger cave system that includes Uamh an Claonaite, the longest cave system in Scotland. There are thirteen known caves in this valley. Over the thousands of years the valley has been deepened, cutting away part of the cave system and leaving the bone caves high and dry on the side of the valley.



The Bone caves

Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Know the code before you go....

You only have access rights if you use them responsibly - the Scottish Outdoor Access Code tells you about this. The key thing is to use your common sense.

- ❖ Take responsibility for your own actions
- ❖ Respect people's privacy and peace of mind.

You can also help by:

- ❖ Looking for alternative routes before entering fields with animals;
- ❖ Not feeding animals;
- ❖ Leaving gates as you find them;
- ❖ Not damaging fences or walls;
- ❖ Taking care for the environment;
- ❖ Keeping your dog under proper control.

For more details:

Visit www.outdooraccess-scotland.com
or e.mail pubs@SNH.gov.uk

North West Highlands Geopark

Assynt lies within The North West Highland Geopark. The geopark is an area of outstanding geological heritage that is run by the local communities to promote sustainable development in a fragile part of Scotland. It is a celebration of the wealth of culture, history, landscape and wildlife, unique to this area that has been fashioned by its geology, though moderated by the climate and tempered by human activities. Stretching from Durness in the north to Achiltibuie in the south, the geopark encompasses 2000 sq km of dramatic scenery and reveals traces of human activity going back thousands of years.

The North West Highlands Geopark is one of 32 partners in the European Geopark network (2008). Globally there are 52 Geoparks all endorsed by UNESCO. Lochaber Geopark the only other one in Scotland. For more information visit the website : www.northwest-highlands-geopark.org.uk

Assynt Location



The Highland Council Countryside Rangers provide a series of guided walks in this area. A programme will be available in the Assynt Visitor Centre or you can check the Assynt website www.assynt.info

For further information contact:
The Highland Council Countryside Rangers in Assynt
Assynt Visitor Centre
Lochinver
Sutherland IV27 4LX
Tel: 01571 844654
Email: andy.summers@highland.gov.uk

The Assynt Tourism Group is a group of locals dedicated to try and promote Assynt as a top class tourist destination. Wherever you travel in Assynt you can be assured of a true Highland Welcome. A wide range of accommodation is available to suit all pockets from hotels, guest houses, B&B's to hostels and camping and caravan sites. A selection of restaurants, cafes, pubs and hotels provide a variety of places to sample local hospitality. For more details see our website: www.assynt.info